DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 310 501 EA 021 211

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TITLE Interventions with Students At-Risk for Dropping Out of School: A High School Responds.
PUB DATE Apr 88
NOTE 21p.; An earlier version of this paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (New Orleans, LA, April 5-9, 1988).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Tests/Evaluation Instruments (160)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Academic Failure; *Dropout Prevention; Dropout Rate; Dropout Research; *High Risk Students; High Schools; *Intervention; *Potential Dropouts; *School Personnel

ABSTRACT

Dropout prevention has become a compelling priority for school personnel. But high school dropout research leaves many school variables largely unexamined. This study describes a staffing committee that had been established in a large urban high school during the 1986-87 school year and responded specifically to referrals of students who were considered to be at-risk for dropping out of school before graduation. The paper discusses the difficulty of implementing interventions and the effectiveness of the interventions. The committee was responsible for monitoring persistent problems of at-risk students: excessive and chronic academic failure, low attendance rates, and inappropriate school conduct. Interventions included individual accommodations as well as building-level, district-level, and community-level programs. The consideration of options for intervention within the school itself is recommended. The follow-up interview and a list of interventions are attached. (14 references) (SI)

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Interventions with Students At-Risk for Dropping Out of School: A High School Responds

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Running Head: Interventions

This work was supported by funds from the Handicapped and Research Demonstration Branch of Special Education Programs, Education Department, through Grant #G008530042, Secondary Educational Transitional Services for Handicapped Youth. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the AERA annual meeting in New Orleans, LA, April, 1988.

EA 021 211

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Interventions with Students At-Risk for Dropping Out of School: A High School Responds

The high school dropout rate in many school districts across the country remains unacceptably high, and dropout prevention has become a compelling priority for school personnel. Nationwide the high school drop out rate is reportedly over 25% of the school population (Mithaugh, Horiuchi, and Fanning, 1985; Wehlage, 1983) and educators are searching for effective programs to keep students in school until graduation (Wehlage, Rutter, Smith, Lesko & Fernandez, 1989; Conrath, 1986). Teachers, support personnel, administrators, community members, and researchers acknowledge the loss to the individual and society when large numbers of students fail to complete their education (Rumberger, 1987).

Current research on the dropout problem focuses on the student (Rumberger, 1987). Numerous authors have documented the student behaviors that correlate with the decision to leave school. These authors agree that students who are likely to drop out of school are those who miss an excessive amount of school (O'Connor, 1985; Johnston, Markle and Harshbarger, 1986), earn poor or failing grades (e.g. Howard and Anderson, 1978; Wehlage, 1986); and who experience abundant disciplinary problems (e.g. Wehlage, 1986). This research implies that these student behaviors should be the targets for dropout prevention, e.g. increase student attendance rates, increase academic performance, decrease non-compliant behavior.

The fact is that student behaviors do not occur in a vacuum; the context for these behaviors must also be understood. Researchers must look at the school organization as it currently exists and describe its impact on students. Studies on organizations other than schools emphasize the impact of organizational structures, norms, and decision-making procedures on the individuals within an organization (Schmuck & Runkel, 1983; Havelock, 1973). Similar assumptions can be made about the impact of school structures on students (Wehlage and Rutter, 1986; Wehlage, 1986).

However, to date there have been few studies that carefully describe school structures or their influence on students' school status, in particular with respect to dropping out. Rumberger (1987) stresses the need for information about how school organization, leadership, and teachers affect students' decisions to leave school before graduation. There is reason to believe that some solutions to the current dropout problem may lie within the schools themselves. For example, in an earlier study the authors described the impact of school activities such as orientation on ninth graders (Sansone and Baker, 1987). Miller and Leinhardt (1987) have examined the academic demands on high school learning disabled students. But in the research on high school dropout, many school variables remain largely unexamined.

The purpose of this study was to describe a committee that had been established in a large urban high school to respond specifically to referrals of students, grades 9-12, who were considered to be at-risk for dropping out of school before graduation. In an earlier study of this

high school, this committee was identified as a school structure that typically generated a wide range of interventions designed to keep students in school (Sansone & Baker, 1987). The current study had three objectives: to describe the committee's interventions, to determine how difficult the interventions were to implement, and to determine how effective the interventions were.

METHODS

Setting

The setting for this study was an urban school district serving 42,000 students in grades K-12. The racial balance of the district is approximately 50% black and the dropout rate of the school district is 30%. The target high school is one of twelve comprehensive high schools in the district; it reports a 27% dropout rate. During the 1986-87 school year, the target school served 1,632 students in grades nine through twelve. The school is located in a predominantly white working class neighborhood, although the busing pattern of the school district creates a racial mix among the student population that is 25% black and 75% white. This school employs approximately 120 professionals, ninety-three of whom are teachers. The teachers are supported by the principal, three vice-principals, five counselors, one rehabilitation counselor, two social workers, and one school psychologist.

The staffing committee was scheduled to meet for approximately

ninety minutes each Friday morning throughout the 1986-87 school year to review the status of students in trouble and to respond to new referrals of student problems. The participants of the staffing committee included administrators and support personnel (e.g. counselors, social workers, the school psychologist). The social worker served as chairperson and organized the proceedings. The typical sequence included a review of the progress of students discussed at previous meetings and an introduction of new referrals. Students were referred to the committee by teachers, administrators and support personnel for a variety of reasons: chronic absence from school; cutting classes during the day; discipline problems in classes, the halls or the lunchroom; failing grades; and drug and alcohol problems.

Procedures

In order to examine one school structure and its influence on students' school status, a case study methodology was utilized. This approach permitted researchers to become familiar with this particular structure and to collect information regarding decisions made by school members of this committee about students. Data were utilized from three sources: field notes, school personnel interviews, and student records.

Field Notes. During the first year of the study, observations were made of a staffing committee in the school from January through March, 1987. Detailed field notes were maintained targeting the number of students discussed, the frequency of students discussed more than once and descriptions of interventions that were generated. Analysis of the field notes resulted in the categorization of interventions discussed

during staffing meetings and development of related questions for the interview protocol.

School Personnel Interviews. The protocol for follow-up interviews was developed for use with staffing personnel utilizing the general interview guide approach suggested by Lofland and Lofland (1984). This approach permits opportunities for spontaneously generated information as well as questions that serve as specific probes. (See Figure 1 for the complete interview protocol.) For example, interviewees were presented with a list of interventions discussed during the committee meetings; then they were asked to identify which of the interventions were most effective and those that were easiest to implement. They were also asked to speculate on which interventions worked for certain students. In addition, they were asked to reflect on evidence of the effectiveness of the staffing mechanism to influence the behavior and decisions of at-risk students. Interviews were conducted with the principal, the social worker, one counselor, one vice-principal, the rehabilitation counselor, and the school psychologist during the second year of the study. Notes were taken throughout the interview and later coded to identify patterns among the responses.

School Records. School records for individual students were also checked to determine whether the students discussed during the staffing meetings were still in school in June, 1988, a year after the interventions were initiated.

FINDINGS

Patterns emerged in the analyses of the field notes from the staffing committee meetings and transcriptions of interviews. These patterns summarized the types of students referred to the staffing committee, the types of problems leading to the referrals, and the types of interventions generated by the group. Evidence regarding the effectiveness of this school structure was verified by checking individual student records.

Field Notes

During seven meetings conducted from mid January through March, 1987, 70 students were discussed and a total of thirty-seven different interventions were suggested (Sansone & Baker, 1987). An intervention was defined as any planned action to modify some aspect of a student's school experience in response to a persistent and serious problem. The interventions were quite varied ranging from individual contracts to a special homeroom program to parent shadowing of the student's schedule. The authors independently sorted the interventions into categories. Through a series of reviews and discussions of the categories developed by the two authors, the following categories were identified: "special" accommodations for individual students, available school-level structures, available district-level structures, and available community-level structures. Interventions that fell within each of these categories are described below.

Individual accommodations. Individual accommodations included adaptations of existing structures. The intervention was planned as needed for an individual student. Individual contracts were written with numerous students who had been suspended repeatedly from school so that they had a chance to return and make up their work without the usual penalty of automatic failure because of missed days. A modified schedule was arranged for a student who was successful during periods 2-7, but continually came late to first period. The social worker arranged an "open door" policy for a particular student so that she would always be able to talk with someone. Additional adaptations designed to facilitate a student's success in school included the following: a sign-in system, consultation with a teacher regarding a specific management plan, and waiving days missed.

Parental involvement was encouraged in individual accommodations. School personnel were sometimes able to meet with family members at the school or in the home to discuss student performance. Parents were often involved in contract interventions. On occasion, a parent was asked to accompany his child on his daily schedule to monitor his whereabouts and behavior. A letter of support was sent to parents who cooperated with the school regarding their child's attendance.

Available school-level structures. Available school-level structures were also utilized to create interventions to keep students in school. Interventions in this set were planned at a school-wide level. A special homeroom program for two groups of at-risk ninth graders was one example of this; two teachers were assigned to each homeroom to

provide the target students with extra support. The teachers called homes and followed up on excessive absenteeism or poor grades. A special academic adaptation was also offered to some ninth graders who experienced academic failure during the first semester so they had the opportunity to pass their ninth grade classes through intensive work during the second semester and in summer school. In response to specific violations of school rules, disciplinary policies were adapted to the needs of individual students. The school options included in-house suspensions, a daily sign-in system for individual students as well as school wide "sweeps" to check on students' whereabouts.

District-level structures. As appropriate, district-level structures were utilized for individual students. These included transfers to other high schools or to alternative schools. District programs were sometimes requested by individual students.

Community-level structures. School personnel maintained contact with community-level structures. Liaison work with group homes, juvenile court, drug and alcohol programs, etc. allowed personnel to make informed recommendations and coordinate programming for students involved with outside agencies.

School Personnel Interviews

In the follow-up interviews, the interviewees augmented the information obtained from the field notes. Most of the interviewees agreed that the categories of interventions described above represented the alternatives generated by their staffing committee. However, one

interviewee suggested that the first two categories, individual accommodations and available school-level structures, might be more accurately labeled "Adaptations of School Structures to Accommodate Individual Students" and "School-wide Programs to Accommodate At-risk Students." He reported that the interventions in the first category are available at all high schools in the district and that the school-wide interventions in the second category involve special planning, and sometimes require additional resources.

Interventions in the categories of individual accommodations and community level structures were most frequently suggested by the committee. School level innovations and district level alternatives seemed to be used least often. A strong relationship between the school social worker and the juvenile court liaison reportedly facilitated coordination of programs with outside agencies.

Individual treatments were generally considered easiest to implement. For example, student contracts, letters of support regarding attendance, "freezing" grades, waiving days missed, and adjusting schedule length were reported to be easy to implement. Meetings with the parent and student at school were reported to be easy for school personnel, but difficult for parents to schedule. Home visits were easier for support personnel to schedule, but difficult for teachers because of their fixed schedules. Although many interventions in this category were listed as easy to implement, they were perceived as time consuming by the interviewees. Interviewees also acknowledged the difficulty in facilitating follow-up after consultation with teachers.

Interventions in the second category (school-level available structures) were described as more difficult to implement. Although not expensive, these special programs sometimes required extra personnel time, planning, scheduling, and/or money. The district-level and community-level options sometimes involved a lengthy process, but they were not seen as difficult to implement.

Most interviewees expressed the need to choose an intervention based on knowing an individual student. They did not see a pattern of certain types of students responding well to a particular intervention. The decision to utilize one intervention instead of an alternative was dependent on the student involved. For example, student A, who had not been responsible about daily assignments was not expected to sign-in daily. Based on knowledge of this student, the committee members might suggest a contract to monitor getting to school on time.

One interviewee, however, identified interventions that he felt were effective with certain types of students. He reported that students who are "turned off" from school benefit from an adjusted schedule length where they only attend five or six class periods per day. Students who are "turned off" to school and/or overage students seemed to respond well to community alternatives such as placement with Job Corps. Finally, students who refused to attend homeroom responded well to an alternative check-in system.

Generally, the interviewees agreed that any intervention can be effective if a thoughtful decision is made regarding the appropriateness of the intervention for the individual student and for the professionals

involved. However, with interventions such as those involving consultation with teachers or arranging for a parent to follow a student's schedule, one must also be realistic about the follow-up and plan to check carefully. One interviewee cited an example in which a student was sitting in the back of a classroom and disrupting the lesson by talking to her peers. A meeting with the teacher and student seemed to defuse the situation, and the teacher reported that the student had improved as a result of collaborative discussion.

All interviewees reported that the staffing committee affected at-risk students by utilizing a wide range of interventions. Participation by counselors, psychologists, social workers, administrators, teachers, and outside personnel broadened the range of interventions proposed. Participants were able to avoid stereotypic responses because of this multidisciplinary approach. The group also made more thoughtful decisions because of the input of multiple personnel. The process was efficient since most of the relevant personnel were involved in the discussion and informed about the plan of action. A key component of the process seemed to be the on-going communication among all the people who worked with the students so that there was consistent follow-through on any plan.

One interviewee stressed that the participation by various personnel not only broadened the type of interventions proposed, but helped maintain the commitment to the process. The members saw the staffing as a priority in their schedule. All indicated the importance of having an established time for the meetings in order to maintain the

process.

Another interviewee described the process as educational for the teachers and support personnel who attended. As they participated in the decision-making process, they learned about alternatives from their colleagues. Since the staffing was seen as a mechanism for on-going professional growth as well as a way to help "at-risk" students, representatives from community agencies were often invited to meetings in order to describe their program or to establish a liaison between the school and the agency. Because contacts were established with community agencies, the staffing personnel were able to refer students to an appropriate program, explain the programs to students and their families, and facilitate timely placements when needed. It was reported that needy students were often admitted to drug programs and mental health programs with a minimum of red tape because of the on-going relationship between the staffing personnel and the agency liaison.

Student Records

In order to confirm the committee's perceptions that their efforts were effective, records were checked for students discussed during the staffing meetings over the three month observation period. Of 70 students reviewed by the committee, 49 could be located a year later (June, 1988). At that time 22 students were attending high school or had successfully graduated. Seventeen students had transferred out of the system, some moving to another district, while others were referred to an alternative setting such as a juvenile court facility. Ten students had left school after reaching the age of 17. The remaining 21 students were

not on file in the district records. (See Table 1.)

SUMMARY

While studying the impact of school structures on at-risk students, the authors discussed a powerful decision making structure, the staffing committee. The staffing committee served as a mechanism through which the school could respond once students fail or misbehave or stop attending school. Observations of the weekly staffing committee meetings provided a first hand perspective of the participants' efforts to deal with idiosyncratic and chronic student problems. The committee, a unique group in the school, was responsible for systematically monitoring persistent problems of at-risk students. These problems included excessive and chronic academic failure, low attendance rates, and inappropriate school conduct. Each week this committee convened to review the current status of students in trouble and respond to referrals of new problem students, often by developing interventions for these students.

The participants in these meetings generated a wide range of interventions including individual accommodations as well as building-level, district-level and community-level programs. The individual interventions were used most often in this school because they were the easiest to implement. School personnel reported that these individual interventions are available in all high schools in this

disctrict and may be available in many schools across the country. The information in student records on the holding power of these interventions was incomplete, but it is worth noting that 55% of the students reviewed were still in school in June, 1988. Because the population served by the committee involved only students having problems in school, this reflects considerable effectiveness with students at risk for dropping out of school.

School district personnel were intrigued by the number of interventions utilized, and interested in the potential for using existing structures to affect students at risk for dropping out. One critical element of the process was the multidisciplinary team. Utilizing input from a group of professionals increased the options for helping students. The second critical element was the set schedule for the group. Problems could be addressed promptly because this meeting was an established priority in the week.

Based on the findings of this study, school personnel searching for programs to keep students in school are encouraged to consider options within the school itself. This study examined one structure in one school, but the interventions described may be available in many school sites. By capitalizing on the expertise in a building, an existing structure can be effective in preventing high school dropouts.

Figure 1

Follow-Up Interview

I. **Ease of Implementation**
   - A. Which interventions can be implemented the fastest?
   - B. Which interventions are the easiest to monitor?
   - C. Which interventions require the least staff effort? The most staff effort?

II. **Effectiveness of Interventions**
   - A. Which interventions were the most helpful to students?
   - B. Which interventions made it possible for staff to deal with at-risk students?

III. **Interventions for Certain Students**
   - A. What type of intervention is most effective with students who are disruptive in class?
   - B. Which interventions work with students who miss school?
   - C. Which interventions work with students who have failing grades?

IV. **Effectiveness of the Staffing Process**
   - A. What evidence is there that the staffing process was helpful in keeping students in school?
   - B. Give me an example of a situation where the staffing group's decision affected an at-risk student.

V. **This Year's Staffing Process**
   - A. Tell me about the staffing group this year.
   - B. Describe the structure of this year's meetings.

Figure 1 (cont.)

List of Interventions

Individual Accomodations
- Student contracts
- Letter of support regarding attendance
- "Freezing" grades
- Consultation with teachers
- Community service during suspension
- Mentoring
- Sign-in system
- Counselor contacts
- Meeting with family and student at school
- Special workshops such as stress management
- Parent follows student schedule
- Waive days missed
- Home visits
- Follow-up for special students
- Adjusted schedule length

Available Structures: School Level
- 300 homeroom
- Co-op credit
- Counseling with school psychologist
- Top 10 list
- In-house suspension
- Sign-in system
- Special homeroom program
- Reading lab
- Parenting program
- Change of classes
- Help for multiple E's
- Daily calls for students in special homerooms
- Project "Turn-about"

Available Structures: District Level
- Letsche placement
- Transfers among high schools
- SED placement

Available Sturctures: Community Level
- Placement with Job Corps or VRC
- Legal citation
- IU Center for GED preparation
- Coordination with juvenile court
- Coordination with other agencies (e.g., Carrick House)
- Allegheny Academy

Table 1

Status of At-Risk Students

Status	Number of Students
Enrolled in target school	5
Enrolled in other schools in district	11
Graduated from high school	6
Excused by school board	1
Transferred to other districts	7
Referred to alternative facilities*	9
Dropped out of school at 17	10
Not on file	21

*Juvenile court, Children and Youth Services, etc.

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